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ABSTRACT

The superintendent's role may be difficult to manage simply because of the existence of a school board. To identify critical incidents that superintendents experienced in their work with boards of education, the superintendents of all 310 K-12 districts in Nebraska were mailed letters asking if they had experienced a critical incident with a school board/board member and if they would be willing to discuss the incident(s). Of the 98 percent of responding superintendents, 58 percent reported experiencing a critical incident; 80 of these superintendents, in the spring of 1989, were interviewed by telephone and responded to 10 open-ended questions. The 80 superintendents described 151 incidents, which were grouped into 12 categories. The most frequently cited critical incidents concerned school board members and their children, relatives, and friends; board members' children, who had been banned from athletic competition, dominated the category. The second most frequently cited critical incident concerned board members' interpretations of their roles. Incidents involving individuals elected to the board on a platform of firing the superintendent were prevalent in the third category. The reported incidents suggest that superintendent preparation should include human relations and mediating conflicting demands. (9 references) (KM)

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Critical Incidents between Superintendents and School Boards: Implications for Practice

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Abstract

Critical Incidents between Superintendents and School Boards: Implications for Practice

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify critical incidents superintendents experience in their work with boards of education. Superintendents of all K-12 districts(310) in Nebraska were asked if they had experienced a critical incident with a school board/board member and if they would be willing to discuss it. Ninety-eight percent of the superintendents responded. Fifty-eight percent reported they had experienced a critical incident. Of these, eighty superintendents were interviewed during Spring 1989.

The interviews provided a rich data base about incidents superintendents experienced with boards. The incidents reported by the superintendents were grouped into 12 categories: board member's child/family/friend, board members involved in administrative issues or speaking individually for the board, individuals with personal agendas elected to the board, superintendent not supported by the board, board itself, athletic coaches, individual board members, community, employee problems, superintendent's contract, superintendent personally, and finance.

Implications of the study for superintendent preparation are suggested by the authors.

Critical Incidents between Superintendents and School Boards: Implications for Practice

The superintendent's role may be difficult to manage simply because of the existence of a school board. The tension between superintendents and school boards has been a subject of study throughout the literature on the school administration. An early definition of the superintendent's and school board's roles was offered by Hunkins in 1949:

> A generally accepted principle of school administration is that the board of education should legislate the policies and appraise the results and the superintendent as the executive put the policies into operation (p. 15).

The subject of this paper is superintendents' experiences with school board members.

Between 1983 and 1987, the dominant topic in journals concerning superintendents was the relationship between superintendents and school boards (Ayalon, 1988; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Shannon, 1989; Tallerico, 1989; Trotter & Downey, 1989). One of the primary causes of superintendent turnover was problems with boards of education (Bryant & Grady, 1988; Grady & Bryant, 1989; Hosman, 1989). This study emerges from our earlier studies of superintendent turnover. The purpose for conducting this study was to identify what school superintendents perceive

to be critical incidents in their work with boards of education.

For the study, superintendents responded to the following:

1. Describe a critical incident you have experienced with a school board or with individual board members.

2. What were the consequences of the critical incident?

Procedures

To obtain the information needed to answer the questions addressed in this study, all 310 superintendents of K-12 school districts in Nebraska received a letter explaining the study. The superintendents responded to two questions: have you experienced a critical incident with a school board or school board member; and, would you be willing to discuss the incident? The researchers intentionally refrained from defining what was meant by critical incident in order to allow each responding superintendent the freedom to determine what was and was not critical.

After two mailings and follow up telephone calls, 98% of the superintendents responded. Of the respondents, 58% experienced a critical incident and 42% did not experience a critical incident. Of the superintendents who experienced a critical incident, 71% (126) agreed to discuss the incident.

Eighty superintendents were available for telephone interviews during Spring 1989. The superintendents responded to ten open-ended questions in sequence. The interviews were from 30-45 minutes in length. The eighty superintendents described 151 incidents with school boards/board members.

Each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified the critical incidents. The researchers compared their findings to verify accurate identification and naming of the incidents. Independently, the researchers developed categories of incidents. The researchers then compared the categories and developed the final typology of incidents. The results are reported in the following section.

Results

The interviews provided a rich data base representing incidents superintendents experienced with boards. The incidents reported by the superintendents were grouped into 12 categories. The 12 categories appear in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Family and Friends

The most frequently cited critical incidents concerned school board members and their children, relatives, and friends. Thirty-six of the 151 incidents (24%) were in this category.

Board members' children and their athletic participation were common incidents. Children banned from athletic competition because of poor grades or for disciplinary reasons dominated the category. Board member behaviors included threatening the superintendent, intimidating the coach, lobbying other board

members, and, in one instance, having a coach terminated because his daughter was not "properly treated" on the basketball team. Children who did not make all-state teams or did not "get favorable treatment" were typical of these cases.

Other child-related incidents included threats of termination or actual termination of teachers or coaches of board member children. Board members sought special treatment for their children including waivers of dress codes, new basketball uniforms, trips to special conventions, and a leading position in a graduation procession. Board members wanted rules waived or ignored for their children. When rules were not waived, the school board members would be vindictive toward the superintendents, in some instances for years after the incidents.

In another incident, board members overturned a student's unexcused absence. The superintendent said this was because of the board members' friendship with the student's parents.

Severe incidents involving board members' children included vandalism, stealing, drug possession, and convictions for driving while intoxicated. In these instances board members requested punishments be suspended for their children.

One superintendent described the spray painting of his house, the destruction of his yard, and the intimidation of his family by the suspended child of a board member.

Relatives of board members were subjects of conflict within the board and with the superintendent. Hiring board members'

relatives was a frequent issue. In one instance, a board member's wife applied for a position and was not hired. The board member resigned. One board member's sister-in-law resigned from her teaching position and the board member voted against retaining the superintendent each year the board member served. One board member's wife was an elementary teacher in the school district, and this teacher's opinions became the foundation for many of the board member's statements at board meetings. The superintendent who fired the wife of a board member, an unproductive school cook, resigned his superintendency at the end of the school year because of the pressure created by that board member. Another superintendent reduced a teacher to a half-time position from a full-time position. In response, the teacher's husband, a board member, voted against the renewal of the superintendent's contract. These instances suggest the vindictive behavior some board members expressed toward superintendents at contract time because of actions related to their family members.

Critical incidents also occurred because of board member friendships. When a superintendent terminated a secretary who did not keep school information confidential, a crisis occurred because the secretary was the best friend of the wife of the school board president. Ultimately, the superintendent told the board he would resign if the secretary remained. The secretary left.

Another incident arose over the termination of a school counselor. The superintendent described the counselor as a "poker buddy" of two of the board members. The board members "wanted to retain their friend."

In hiring non-certified personnel in one district, a crisis emerged because many applicants were locals and friends of different board members. In one instance, an influential community member persuaded his friends on the school board to modify gym-use policies to accommodate his needs. Against the recommendations of the school's attorney and superintendent, the influential community member prevailed.

Another incident involved the school board president, who was the minister of a major local church. A family of major contributors to his church demanded that the school district pay for their child's tuition at a special school. The board refused to pay. Ultimately the board president resigned.

Instances of pressure by friends illustrate the challenges board members face as they attempt to balance their board role and their personal relationships. In several incidents the personal relationships influenced board decisions and accelerated conflict.

Board Member Roles

The second most frequently cited critical incident concerned board members' interpretations of their roles. Twenty-seven of the 151 incidents (18%) were in this category.

The superintendents described incidents of community members approaching individual board members outside board meetings about issues such as gym or football field use. Board member statements to these community members were often the cause of critical incidents. In these situations, the community members did not approach the superintendent at all.

Long-term, non-certified employees of school districts frequently approached board members with their problems. One superintendent reported that a board member even assured a teacher that her position was secure, when it was not.

The superintendents described incidents of board members' involvement in administrative roles, including attempting to evaluate personnel, assessing school bus driver performance, and purchasing items for the school without the superintendent's knowledge. One board member wanted to "okay" every decision the superintendent made.

A source of other critical incidents was board members listening to their neighbors' assessment of teaching and coaching performance. One superintendent reported that his board members were being advised by a previous superintendent who worked for a neighboring school district.

Superintendents identified instances of board members attempting to "get rid" of certain teachers. In one situation, parents complained to two board members about a teacher. The

superintendent discovered the two board members and the parents in the school preparing to confront the teacher.

In two instances, board members took actions to terminate principals by illegal means according to the superintendents. In two other instances, superintendents reported terminations that were premature. The superintendents noted that the terminations were unnecessary since the employees could have improved. These situations were described as losses to the school districts because of the board members' hasty actions.

In these instances, the board members deviated from their formal role, were prey to gossip, attempted to evaluate teachers and assumed other administrative functions. Board members operating outside their role attempted to "get even" with teachers and to use their position on the board for personal interests.

Who's Elected to the Board

Seventeen incidents (11%) formed a third category labeled who's elected to the board. Dominant in this category were individuals elected to the board on a platform of firing the superintendent. As part of one board member's campaign strategy, he placed an ad in the newspaper saying he could not accomplish much on the board until he "got rid" of the superintendent. Three individuals were elected to the school board with the stated intention of firing the superintendent. After election and the firing of the superintendent, the three board members

resigned. A woman ran for the board "to get rid of the superintendent" because her son was punished for vandalism. After her election, the superintendent was not rehired. One man was elected to the school board to harass the superintendent. The superintendent resigned.

A woman ran for the school board to fire the superintendent and principal because they did not support the wrestling program. The superintendent remained. Another individual ran for election to the school board with the intention of firing the superintendent. The individual became less militant when he realized the extent of the superintendent's job.

Fired school district employees were elected to school boards. These included a principal and teacher who succeeded in firing the superintendent. Other school employees who had been terminated and were elected included a dismissed school teacher and a dismissed school bus driver.

The election of ex-teachers or teachers from other districts also caused critical incidents. According to the superintendents, these individuals constantly questioned the superintendent and were unsympathetic to the teachers in the district.

Three superintendents noted the election of individuals who had directed unsuccessful recall elections as critical incidents. One incident, described as a simple personality conflict between

two board members, included consistent fights at every board meeting.

A simple description for this category of incidents would be individuals elected to the school board with an "ax to grind." The dominant "ax to grind" was attempting to fire the superintendent. Of 17 incidents reported, 4 resulted in the firing or resignation of the superintendent.

Superintendent Not Supported

Fifteen incidents (10%) formed a fourth category labeled "superintendent not supported." Incidents in which superintendents' recommendations for hiring were not followed by school boards were typical of this category. For instance, the board hired a principal contrary to a superintendent's recommendation. In another incident, the board hired a principal who was "the cheapest candidate--not the best" according to the superintendent. Contrary to another superintendent's recommendation, two teachers were not rehired. One superintendent resigned because the board did not hire according to his recommendations.

Superintendents noted that their school boards failed to follow their maintenance recommendations. In each case, the boards used economics as reasons for not accepting the superintendents' recommendations.

In three incidents, board members insisted on hiring local people "regardless of their lack of professional qualifications."

In two districts, school boards consistently overturned disciplinary actions. Other incidents of superintendents not being supported included board members questioning superintendent decisions, questioning the superintendent's honesty, and questioning the handling of finances. Another superintendent said that the board supported teachers over the superintendent regarding advancement on a "lenient" salary schedule. One superintendent described the lack of a superintendent's evaluation as the critical incident that resulted in his non-renewal for "no apparent reason."

Superintendents reporting incidents of not being supported by the school board suggested that these incidents created a feeling of unpredictability. They noted that these situations made it difficult for them to make decisions because they were uncertain how the board would respond.

Board Malfunctions

The fifth category included 14 (9%) incidents precipitated by the board itself. Board stagnation occurred in one district when no one ran for election against the incumbents. One superintendent described the dissolution of board standing committees because of their ineffectiveness. Superintendents described critical incidents emerging because board members could not stick to a topic of discussion. One superintendent described a school board that allowed anyone to speak at a board meeting. These board meetings became lengthy events, with attacks on the

superintendent typical because of the recent consolidation of school districts. The frustrated superintendent resigned.

In one district, 2 of the 6 board members would not make or second motions. They were silent members. One school board was inconsistent in its interest in spending. The board vacillated between questioning small purchases to having no interest in expenditures at all.

Individuals who aspired to be board president caused 2 incidents. In one instance, a person not elected as president was "bitter" and blamed the superintendent for not being chosen. In the other instance, a person not chosen to be president resigned from the board.

One 6 member board included 4 members who either were bankrupt or had sold their farms. These 4 members constantly worried about spending until the school's program suffered. This board could not look to the future or do any long-range planning. The superintendent resigned.

Two individuals ran for the board on platforms of reducing spending. Once elected the board froze the budget of expenditures for the district for 2 years.

A conservative superintendent described a school board as free spenders. The superintendent resigned because he said he knew he would be fired.

One school board allowed non-agenda items to be discussed at

the board meetings. These non-agenda items usually included attacks against the superintendent. The superintendent resigned.

These incidents linked to the composition of the board and its behavior as a group led to 4 resignations out of 14 incidents reported.

Athletic Coaches

Ten incidents (7%) involved athletic coaches and board members. These incidents were examples of attempts to terminate coaches for losing seasons or for perceived unfair treatment of board members' children. Two coaches with good records were released against community sentiment because board members perceived the coaches to be poor role models or poor communicators with players.

One superintendent reported that board members attempted to reassign coaches by contacting the coaches and making offers to them. These offers were only brought to the superintendent's attention two months after they had been made.

In another situation, a coach took legal action against students who vandalized his property. Because of community and teacher sentiment against his actions, the coach was fired.

The critical incidents that emerged because of coaching situations were ones in which the superintendent appeared to have little role or control. The board members appeared to pursue these issues with determination.

The Community

Eight critical incidents (5%) occurred because of the nature of the communities. One incident arose because of a local graduation tradition. The graduation procession was traditionally led by the top six junior girls and the top six junior boys based on academic class rank. A board member's daughter ranked seventh in the junior class and was academically higher than any of the boys. The parents besieged the school board because of this policy. No immediate action resulted.

Board members arranged for a religious speaker during school hours against the advice of the school's attorney and the superintendent. The board members arranged this independently. Because of the make-up of the community, this was an accepted practice.

Community groups attending board meetings as "watchdogs" were concerns of three superintendents. One such group, dedicated to cutting taxes and reducing the number of administrators, attended every meeting for seven months.

One superintendent discussed the influx of city people to a rural community as a critical incident. After the election of city people to the board, problems became more evident. The superintendent resigned.

The school board terminated a popular teacher. In response, a community group advertised for a new principal.

Another superintendent noted multiple deaths of staff and students as well as a suicide attempt and a terminal illness as critical incidents.

These critical incidents reflected issues unique to each of the communities.

Individual Board Members

Eight critical incidents (5%) emerged because of individual board members. These incidents were symptomatic of the problems or personalities of these individual board members. One superintendent described a board member who had personal problems. The superintendent said that this individual's personal problems often had an impact on board discussions.

An unhappy board member, with a masters degree in business administration, returned to the community to run a family farm. This individual decided he could run the school because of his business background. He spread incorrect information about the school's budget causing critical incidents for the superintendent and board.

One school board member ran her own school board meetings outside the regular board meetings. She also conducted individual polls on a variety of issues.

One superintendent described a board member who spent an incredible amount of time with him. Another superintendent described a drugstore owner--board member who expected purchases to be made from him regardless of cost. Another board member had a personal agenda that he tried to push through board meetings. One superintendent complained of board members who served on multiple boards.

According to the superintendents, these individual board members precipitated critical incidents because of their

persistent demands. These individual board members were annoying to the superintendents.

Employee

School employees accounted for six critical incidents (4%). One employee failed to return a contract by the designated time. A district hearing on the issue cost $2,000. The terminated employee had to re-apply for a position in the district.

A teacher accused of sexual assault of a student was the subject of another critical incident. Although the teacher was proven to be innocent, the "incident" was, nevertheless, critical.

A school employee convicted of driving while intoxicated in a school vehicle created a critical incident for a district. The employee retained his position in the district.

Teachers falsified grades on a student's report card but placed accurate grades on the student's permanent record. The mother of this child was a school board member who was an incessant critic of the schools. When the discrepancy in the records was discovered, the superintendent had to explain the situation to the parents.

Because of inadequate services, contracts with two agencies ended. An educational service unit's contract ended because of poor quality services. A shared educational program also was discontinued because of poor quality.

Contracts

Superintendents described contract problems as the sources of six critical incidents (4%). One superintendent noted a 3-3 vote on his contract as a critical incident. When he asked the board for reasons for the vote he was told that he was too easy on the employees.

A board reduced a superintendent's 2-year contract to a 1-year contract. The board claimed to be pleased with the superintendent's performance but wanted the superintendent's contract renewed annually.

Another critical incident involved a district changing the month for consideration of the superintendent's contract. This change was made by the board so that an outgoing board member could vote on the superintendent's contract.

One critical incident occurred because a superintendent wanted assurances from the board that he could be released from his contract if he got a better offer. The board would not give him such assurance.

One superintendent simply described being fired without reasons as a critical incident.

Superintendent

Three critical incidents (2%) emerged because of the superintendents themselves. In one case a superintendent who smoked and drank felt ostracized by the school board because of his habits.

One superintendent banned a bookmobile because of the book collection. This action caused a critical incident when the community did not support him.

A superintendent resigned when a handbook he proposed was not adopted by the school board. The superintendent expected the board to "come after him." His resignation was accepted.

Finances

One final critical incident concerned school finances. A superintendent was hired after the previous administration had spent the district's cash reserves. The local taxes increased 22% during the new superintendent's administration. This was a major critical incident for the community and school board.

Resignations/Terminations

In conjunction with the incidents reported by these 80 superintendents, the superintendents reported resigning their positions in 17 instances. Two superintendents were terminated because of the incidents. Of the 80 superintendents, 1 reported resigning twice and 1 superintendent reported resigning once and being terminated once.

Implications

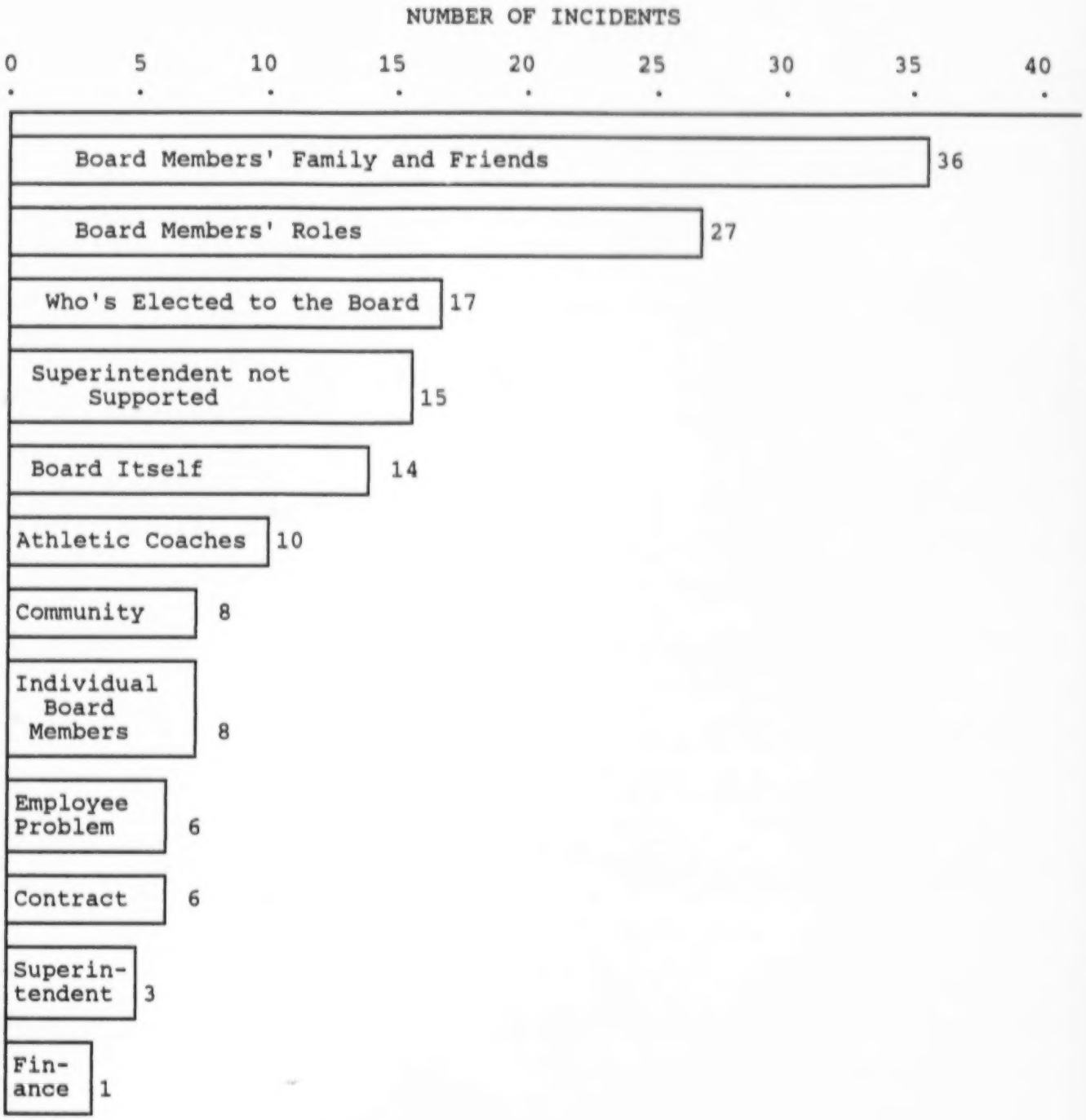
These incidents suggest that a primary area for superintendent preparation should be human relations and mediating conflicting demands. The incidents reported here emerge from working with people who bring diverse backgrounds and expectations to their roles as school board members.

Superintendents need preparation experiences that enable them to excel in interpersonal relations.

Superintendent preparation should prepare candidates to recognize situations that potentially could lead to superintendent turnover. In this study, 19 incidents of superintendent turnover occurred because of the critical incidents. Identifying the causes of superintendent turnover and developing skills in handling the situations should be considerations in preparation experiences.

There is evidence to suggest that board members have difficulty separating their roles as school board members from their roles as parents or family members. Also, it appears that board members may not understand their roles as board members or may choose to ignore them and may engage in actions that are not appropriate. Thus, preparation for superintendents should emphasize the task superintendents encounter in educating school board members for their roles, as well as understanding school board member behaviors and characteristics. Programs to prepare board members for their roles should be required.

Both superintendents and board members need a clearer understanding of their roles and expectations. School district goals need to be a clear focus for both superintendent and board member activities. By having clear goals, attention may be diverted from personal agendas to the district agenda.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